

University Consolidations and Multi-Campus Institutions: Prevailing when Cultures Collide

The sociocultural aspects of campus and faculty integration are largely overlooked by leaders when they plan consolidations in higher education. In this presentation, we will share our experiences of working through departmental consolidation and multi-campus challenges from our perspective as administrators located on different campuses. We will then facilitate a discussion of best practices for communication and problem solving across campuses.

In the last five years, over 25 universities in the U.S. have consolidated, impacting over one hundred thousand of faculty. Many more mergers continue to be considered. This boom in higher education mergers is a result, in part, of the great recession. When state tax revenues began dropping in 2007, state funding for higher education was cut. Despite a 9% increase in college enrollment since 2007, the average state funding per FTE has decreased by 18%. This translates to a loss of \$2000 per student and millions of dollars of lost revenue per year for most institutions. Much of the financial burden is being passed on to students. Since 2007, tuition and fees have increased by more than 25% for most students, and student loan debt has doubled, now a staggering \$1.2 trillion dollars. University chancellors and administrators are under tremendous pressure to cut expenditures.

In an effort to increase efficiencies and effectiveness, the University System of Georgia began an initiative in 2011 to consolidate institutions. Consolidations are implicitly challenging: establishments with distinct missions, organizational structures, facilities, campus cultures, curricula, budgets and expectations must amalgamate into a single organization. From an employee perspective, this period of integration is marked by stress and conflict, and reconciling loyalty to a new institution. Our University of North Georgia consolidation was particularly difficult because it brought together the disparate missions of a state university with student admissions criteria and faculty research requirements, with a state college with an access mission and no faculty research requirements. When consolidated, our new institution required all faculty to do research and publish.

Our large, blended department was obliged to re-evaluate and re-define the most fundamental issues. Given that our department spans four campuses of different sizes with different student populations, lab facilities and course offerings, there were many challenges. We will begin our presentation by sharing the decision-making processes and resulting protocols we developed for many issues, including curriculum; program quality assessment; enrollment management; research expectations and support; faculty annual evaluations; promotion and tenure; faculty pay; and budgets for faculty, labs and student assistants. In the second component of our session, we will facilitate a discussion of best practices for multi-campus problem-solving and distance communication. We invite everyone to explore the balancing act of finding consensus and reducing conflict and stress for faculty of consolidation.